

VZCZCXR00316

RR RUEHAG RUEHAST RUEHDA RUEHDF RUEHFL RUEHIK RUEHKW RUEHLA RUEHZN
RUEHLZ RUEHNP RUEHPOD RUEHROV RUEHSR RUEHVK RUEHYG
DE RUEHRA #0726 3311323
ZNR UUUUU ZZH
R 261323Z NOV 08
FM AMEMBASSY RIGA
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 5412
INFO RUEHZN/EUROPEAN POLITICAL COLLECTIVE

UNCLAS RIGA 000726

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: PGOV LG

SUBJECT: ZATLERS UPS PRESSURE ON PARTIES TO ALLOW PUBLIC TO DISMISS PARLIAMENT

¶1. Summary: Latvia's president Valdis Zatlers, who has so far struggled to find his signature issues in domestic politics, has seized on the idea of amending the constitution to allow the public to initiate a dismissal of Saeima. It is tough because the amendments must be passed by Saeima and Zatlers' options to force action are limited. While he could call for dismissing Saeima, this would be difficult in Latvia's current economic crisis, but the president is earning respect from even former critics for his stand on this issue. End summary.

¶2. Currently, the constitution allows to President to initiate dissolution of Saeima at any time and for any reason. If he does so, the question is put to a referendum and if it passes, new elections are called. If it fails, the President is removed from office and the Saeima elects a new head of state.

¶3. Growing public discontent with the actions of the current Saeima, most notably the dismissal of the anti-corruption chief, resulted in an August referendum on amendments to the constitution designed to give voters the authority to disband the parliament. Despite legal criticism of the drafting of the amendments as ambiguous, the proposal ultimately failed only because of the constitutional requirement that more than 50% of citizens eligible to vote must cast ballots in favor of a constitutional amendment proposal for it to pass. This threshold was narrowly missed, with more than 40% of eligible voters supporting the amendments. Coalition parties, which had opposed the amendment, responded to the public support by agreeing to draft a new version of amendments giving the public the right to initiate a dismissal of Saeima. President Zatlers announced his support for the idea and urged action by the end of the year, but a parliamentary subcommittee quickly deadlocked.

¶4. Unexpectedly, Zatlers used his speech on the 90th anniversary of the founding of the Latvian state to call for the Saeima to move quickly to adopt the amendments. What is normally a hortatory address on Latvian history and culture took on a political tone that was well received by the crowd gathered by the Freedom Monument. The President followed it up by calling in the heads of all parties in Saeima to hear their views on the issue and call for action.

¶5. The challenge Zatlers faces is that constitutional amendments require a 2/3 majority in Saeima and, rhetoric aside, it is unclear whether even a majority of Saeima support the concept of a publicly initiated dissolution. And even among supporters, there is no agreement on the details, especially on the minimum required participation of voters in a recall vote.

¶6. Beyond the bully pulpit, though, Zatlers has few levers to call for action. He does have the right to submit a proposed text for the amendments, but he runs the risk of whatever wording and structure he chooses being immediately associated with one of the political parties, which could make it difficult for him to find the 2/3 majority needed for adoption. Instead, the President has submitted "guidelines" of what he would like to see without getting into too many specifics. His ultimate weapon would be to call for a dissolution of Saeima and the necessary referendum, which he would almost certainly win. But that would leave Latvia with a caretaker government and legislature that could only meet on issues the President proposes for as much as six months, something that could

be very risky and cumbersome in the current economic situation here.

¶7. There is a possibility that two-thirds of Saeima could agree to amendments that change the President's role in the process. One possibility would be to remove the requirement for the President to go to a referendum or risk his job when calling for a dissolution, but limit the circumstances and times when he could dissolve parliament. This is unlikely to satisfy the public, who are suspicious that Saeima would ever elect a President willing to use this power.

¶8. Comment: The Latvian president is a primarily ceremonial role and the incumbent has to define his role in Latvian politics himself. Zatlers' predecessor, Vaira Vike-Freiberga, earned public appreciation for her success on the international stage and her tough lines against corruption at home. Zatlers has so far struggled to define his role and earn public trust. The constitutional amendments seem to be the area of domestic policy he has decided to devote political capital to address. If Saeima passed the amendments and granted voters the desired chance to disband the parliament, Zatlers could with good reason claim it was his achievement. But getting to that point is very hard and the President runs the risk that if he fails at this, his influence and stature would decline.

Larson